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I, LEANNE MYNOTT, MANAGER EXAMINATION SUPPORT AND SALES hereby certify that annexed is a true copy of the Provisional specification in connection with Application No. 2004901316 for a patent by REALISTIC PITCHING MACHINES PTY. LTD as filed on 12 March 2004.



WITNESS my hand this
Twenty-first day of March 2005

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to be 'LM' or 'LA' with a flourish.

LEANNE MYNOTT
MANAGER EXAMINATION SUPPORT
AND SALES

AUSTRALIA

Patents Act 1990

PROVISIONAL SPECIFICATION

APPLICANT: REALISTIC PITCHING MACHINES PTY. LTD.

Invention Title: BALL PROPELLING MACHINE

The invention is described in the following statement:-

BALL PROPELLING MACHINE

FIELD OF THE INVENTION

- 5 The invention relates to a machine and method of propelling a ball to simulate balls propelled in sports such as baseball. More particularly, the present invention relates to an assembly and method of spinning a ball prior to being propelled from a ball propelling machine. The balls are preferably seamed.

10 BACKGROUND ART

- For many years ball propelling machines have been used as a training aid in a variety of sports. There are a number of different types of ball propelling machine presently available. However, three forms of ball propelling machine
- 15 dominate the market. One type uses a pair of counter-rotating wheels to propel the ball, another uses a mechanical arm to throw the ball, and a third uses expanding gas, such as compressed air, to propel the ball from the machine.

- US Patent No. 6, 202,636 is an example of the third type, and describes a
- 20 pitching machine which relies on expanding gas to propel a ball down a barrel towards an intended target. Some variability in the amount of spin imparted to the ball can be achieved by means of an adjustable friction surface which forms a portion of the barrel. Seamed balls such as baseballs are usually pitched in either a two or four seam (stitching) position, yet this is not taken into account in
- 25 this machine. Accordingly, there exists a need in the art for a ball propelling

machine that offers advantages in terms of ease of use and/or flexibility in terms of imparting spin and/or velocity to a baseball or the like propelled therefrom.

SUMMARY OF INVENTION

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This invention aims to provide an alternative to known ball propelling machines and methods.

In one aspect this invention resides broadly in a ball propelling assembly for propelling a ball having a seam, the assembly including:-

10 a ball positioner having opposed ball supports which frictionally engage and rotate the ball which thereby moves relative to the ball supports until fixedly positioned relative thereto in a predetermined alignment;

 a ball spinner having opposed ball supports which frictionally engage and spin a ball engaged thereby in the predetermined alignment, and

15 a ball propeller which propels the spinning ball from the assembly along an axis of propulsion.

It is preferred that the ball spinner means includes two pairs of opposed ball supports, the pairs being aligned to each other at right angles.

It is also preferred that one of the opposed pairs comprises the pair of opposed
20 ball supports in the ball positioning means.

It is also preferred that the assembly includes an actuator which advances and retracts the ball supports towards and from a ball.

It is also preferred that the assembly includes a rotor which rotates and/or spins the ball supports.

It is also preferred that the assembly includes a rotary positioner which rotates the position of the two pairs of opposed ball supports about the axis of propulsion.

It is also preferred that the assembly includes a controller which selectively
5 controls the rotation of the rotor, and the position of the positioner and the retraction or advancement of the actuator.

It is also preferred that the predetermined alignment is either such that the ball is positioned to be propelled with a two seam spin, or is propelled with a four seam spin.

10 It is also preferred that in the predetermined alignment the ball is not engaged by the opposed ball supports along the seam.

In another aspect this invention resides broadly in a method of propelling a ball having a seam, the method including:-

frictionally engaging and rotating the ball by a ball positioner having opposed
15 ball supports, the ball thereby moving relative to the ball supports until fixedly positioned relative thereto in a predetermined alignment;

frictionally engaging and spinning a ball engaged thereby in the predetermined alignment by a ball spinner having opposed ball supports, and
propelling the spinning ball from the assembly along an axis of propulsion by
20 a ball propeller.

In another aspect, the present invention provides a method of aligning the seam on a baseball prior to the baseball being propelled from a ball propelling machine, comprising bringing a pair of opposing ball supports into contact with the baseball and rotating the ball supports until the ball supports contact the ball
25 in two of the loop shaped regions of the continuous stitched seam.

In another aspect, the present invention resides in an assembly for aligning the seam of a baseball prior to the baseball being propelled from a ball propelling machine, the assembly comprising at least one pair of opposing ball supports, wherein upon rotation of the ball supports the ball moves in relation to the ball supports until the ball supports contact two of the loop shaped regions of the continuous stitched seam.

Additional preferred features of the invention will be apparent from the dependant claims and from the following description of the preferred embodiment.

While compressed air is preferred for propelling the baseball, it would be readily appreciated by the skilled addressee that other expanding gases may be used. For example, the ball machine could be used in conjunction with a combustible gas and ignition source.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF DRAWINGS

The invention will now be described in a non-limiting manner with respect to a preferred embodiment in which:-

FIG 1 is a perspective view of a ball propelling machine;

FIGs 2 to 9 are schematic views of the ball spinning assembly of the present invention illustrating various spinning operations;

FIGs 10(a) to 10(c) are perspective views of the ball spinning assembly of the present invention. FIG 10(a) is an exploded perspective view, FIG 10(b) is a

perspective view of the rear of the ball spinning assembly and FIG 10(c) is a perspective view of the front of the assembly;

FIG 11(a) is an exploded perspective view of the combined main barrel and ball spinning assembly of the present invention. FIG 11(b) is a perspective view of the assembled spinning assembly;

FIGs 12(a) and 12(d) are perspective views of the combined ball spinning assembly, main barrel and mounting assembly of the present invention. FIGs 12(b) and 12(c) are elevations of the combined assembly and FIG 12(e) is a plan view; and,

FIG 13(a) is an exploded perspective view of the ball support and associated motor assembly of the ball spinning assembly of the present invention. FIG 13(b) is a perspective view of the assembled ball support and associated motor assembly of the ball spinning assembly.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF PREFERRED EMBODIMENT

Baseballs are required to be thrown with the stitches/seam in a known position as this affects the movement of the ball through the air. If this is not taken into consideration and the balls are pitched randomly, the distance a spinning ball moves off-line will differ each time a ball is released. According to the present invention, identical spin in terms of both rate of revolution and axis of rotation can be applied to a ball propelled from the machine. Hence, it is possible to repeatedly simulate a desired type of pitch.

Fig 1 shows one example of a ball propelling machine 10 that may utilise a ball spinning assembly according to the preferred embodiment of the present invention. Typically, the ball propelling machine will include a ball spinning assembly 12, ball firing component 14, tripod stand 16 with legs 18, tilting mechanism 20, barrel 22, ball feed tube 24 and ball 26. The ball firing component 14 is connected to a source of compressed gas, such as a cylinder of compressed air or powered compressor via an air inlet hose made of, for example, a resilient material such as rubber or plastic.

10 The main body components of the device, including the ball spinning assembly 12, may be constructed from a variety of suitable materials which include various metals, metal alloys or plastics. The tripod stand 16 and tilting mechanism 20 which support the ball propelling assembly is conventional in design and construction. Varying the height of the tripod stand, for example by

15 the use of telescopic legs, varies the height of the machine from the playing surface and consequently the angle of descent of a ball propelled towards a target. Varying the height of the assembly allows for the replication of balls propelled from players of different height.

20 The ball propelling machine may have a ball feed tube such as that depicted in FIG 1. The tube can be of any practical length and may be used to hold one or more balls prior to a ball entering the ball spinning assembly. The ball feed tube may be used in conjunction with a signalling device, so that the player has appropriate warning that a ball is about to be propelled. For example, a ball

25 entering the ball feed tube may visually signal to the ball receiver that a ball is

about to be propelled from the machine. Alternatively, according to the preferred embodiment of the present invention, the ball propelling machine is loaded by placing a ball directly into the open end of the barrel and allowing the ball to roll down the barrel into the ball spinning assembly.

5

In operation, a ball 26 is positioned in ball spinning assembly 12. Compressed air is supplied to, and optionally stored in, ball firing component 14. Upon firing, compressed air forces the ball from ball spinning assembly 12 through barrel 22 toward the target.

10

Figs 2 to 9 depict a schematic view of the ball spinning assembly of the present invention. Figs 2 to 9 illustrate how a baseball can have its seams aligned and subsequently spun by the ball spinning assembly of the present invention prior to firing. In this way, the different types of spin imparted by a baseball pitcher can be substantially replicated by the ball spinning assembly of the present invention.

15

Figs 2 to 9 schematically illustrate the ball spinning assembly 12, including four ball supports 28A, 28B, 28C and 28D. In use, ball supports 28A, 28B, 28C and 28D initially are in a retracted position, and a ball 26 comes to rest between the ball supports of the ball spinning component 12. The ball can enter the barrel 22 of the ball spinning assembly 12 by either being loaded directly into the end of the barrel 22 or via a ball feed tube such as that depicted in Fig 1.

20

As depicted in Fig 2, once a ball is positioned in the ball spinning assembly, an opposing pair of ball supports 28A, 28B move towards each other as indicated by directional arrows P and Q and come into contact with the ball. As depicted in Fig 2, ball supports 28A, 28B are preferred as these are horizontal to the playing surface, rather than ball supports 28C, 28D which are vertical to the playing surface. However, if the barrel is rotated 90 degrees as depicted in Fig 9, the ball supports 28C, 28D are then preferred as 28C, 28D are now horizontal to the playing surface.

Referring to Fig 3, the opposing pair of ball supports 28A, 28B have been brought into contact with the ball 26 and are rotated in the direction as indicated by arrows M to thereby spin the ball as indicated by arrow N.

It has been found by the present inventors that if the opposing pair of ball supports 28A, 28B loosely grip and spin the baseball, the surface of the ball will move relative to the ball supports until the ball is gripped by the ball supports so as not to contact the stitching of the ball, but rather contact the ball in two of the loop shaped regions of the continuous stitched seam. The ball will settle in this position irrespective of how it is initially grasped by the supports. An aligned ball is depicted in Fig 4. While not wishing to be bound by this theory, it is possible that slight differences in ball circumference and/or weight of the ball due to the raised stitching may be the reason why this occurs. It is important to note that if the ball is gripped too tightly by ball supports 28A, 28B, the ball will not be able to move relative to the ball supports and adopt the "aligned" position.

Once the ball has been aligned, either pair of opposed ball supports 28A, 28B or 28C, 28D can be employed to apply a predetermined amount of spin to the aligned ball. For example, in Fig 4 ball supports 28A, 28B which were used to align the ball are advanced towards the ball and thereafter employed to impart a predetermined amount of spin to the aligned ball. Alternatively, as depicted in Fig 5, ball supports 28C and 28D can be brought into contact with the aligned ball as indicated by directional arrows R and S. Ball supports 28A and 28B are thereafter retracted as indicated by directional arrows T and U in Fig 6, and ball supports 28C, 28D employed to apply a predetermined amount of spin to the ball. Preferably, once the ball has been aligned, the pair of ball supports employed to apply a predetermined amount of spin to the ball, grip the ball more firmly so as to keep the same alignment.

In applying a predetermined amount of spin to an aligned ball, an axis of rotation must first be selected. For example, Fig 4 depicts the ball supports 28A, 28B spinning the ball in what is known as the "two seam" position, and which is explained in greater detail below. In contrast, Fig 7 depicts the pair of opposing ball supports 28C, 28D gripping the ball and the ball being spun in the four seam position, also explained below. Ball supports 28C and 28D can also be employed to spin the ball in the two seam position, however this configuration is not depicted in the drawings.

Referring again to Fig 4, if a ball is spun in a direction shown by arrow N about an axis M and propelled in the direction of Z, then a person along the path of

travel viewing the ball as it approaches will see the seam two times for each revolution of the ball about the axis M. This is called the two seam position.

Referring again to Fig 7, if a ball is spun in a direction shown by arrow X about
5 an axis Y and propelled in the direction of Z, then a person along the path of travel viewing the ball as it approaches will see the seam four times for each revolution of the ball about the axis Y. This is called the four seam position.

In practice, ball supports 28C, 29D can be used to spin an aligned ball in the
10 four seam position by firstly advancing ball supports 28C, 28D towards a ball being spun by ball supports 28A, 28B (which loosely grip the ball) until interaction of the seam of the ball with ball supports 28C, 28D prevents the ball from rotating. Ball supports 28C, 28D are then rotated to spin the ball in the four seam position. It has been found that advancing ball supports 28C, 28D
15 towards the rotating ball stops the ball rotating at the point where the each of the pair of ball supports 28C, 29D cover two distinct sections of seam, as at this point the ball has a marginally greater circumference. Preferably, the ball is rotated slowly by ball supports 28A, 28B.

20 Fig 8 depicts the aligned baseball spinning in the four seam position, but with the ball spinning assembly 12 rotated 90 degrees from that in Figs 2-7. Ball supports 28C, 28D now appear horizontal, rather than vertical. Bearings 32 and 34 (as depicted in Fig 10) allow the ball spinning assembly 12 to be rotatably attached to the ball firing assembly 14 and barrel 22, thus allowing the ball
25 spinning assembly to be rotated 360 degrees relative to the other components.

Rotation allows the orientation of spin to change, for example, from topspin to sidespin. Rotation of the ball spinning assembly can be automated, for example by a motorised pinion and ring gear as discussed below. A control module may also be employed to vary the relative position of the assembly. Fig 9 depicts

5 the retraction of the ball supports 28C, 28D as indicated by directional arrows D and E, and a ball spinning in the four seam position being fired from the barrel.

As stated above, the ball spinning assembly 12 can be made from metal, metal alloy or plastic, however aluminium is preferred. The ball supports 28A, 28B,

10 28C, 28D may be constructed of similar materials. Alternatively, it may be desirable to use different materials for different ball supports. For example, ball supports 28A, 28B may be aluminium, where supports 28C, 28D may be rubber or plastic and the stem aluminium. According to the preferred embodiment, the ball supports have a substantially concave surface to contact the ball and

15 enhance frictional drive between the supports and the ball.

Figs 10(a) to 10(c) depict the ball spinning assembly 12 according to the preferred embodiment of the present invention. Specifically, Fig 10(a) depicts the housing of the ball spinning assembly 42, motors 40 and associated pulleys

20 36, ball supports 28 and associated pulleys 38 and pneumatic pistons 44. Motors 40 provide rotary motion to the ball supports 28 via a belt (not shown) between pulleys 36 and 38. In turn, the ball supports hold and rotate the baseball about an axis. Pneumatic pistons 44 advance and retract the ball supports from contact with a loaded ball. The pneumatic pistons can be

employed to vary the amount of pressure applied by the ball supports on a loaded baseball in accordance with the method of the present invention.

5 The rotation of the motors can be clockwise or anticlockwise depending upon the direction of axial spin required on the ball when fired. By varying the speed of rotation of the motors, it is possible to vary the amount of spin imparted on the ball when fired. Further, as discussed above, the spinning assembly 12 can be rotated relative to the horizontal playing surface, so that balls with, for example, topspin or sidespin can be propelled toward the target.

10

Fig 11(a) and 11(b) depict a configuration of the ball spinning assembly according to the present invention which allows the housing 42 of the ball spinning assembly to be rotated relative, to say, a horizontal playing surface. Specifically, motor 48 can be employed to rotate ring gear 50 and thus rotate
15 the ball spinning assembly. Valve body 46 allows compressed air to propel a baseball spinning in the ball spinning assembly to be propelled from the machine.

Figs 12(a) to 12(e) depict the full assembly according to a preferred
20 embodiment of the present invention. In addition to that depicted in Fig 11, Figs 12(a) to 12(e) depict a support frame 52 that can be raised or lowered by motor 54 relative to pivot pin 56. This configuration allows for balls of different trajectory but identical spin to be propelled from the machine.

In use, a ball is placed in the open end of the barrel and allowed to roll into the ball spinning assembly. Once inside the ball spinning assembly the ball is aligned, spun at a predetermined rate of revolutions about a predetermined axis and subsequently propelled from the machine by compressed air toward the
5 target. All of these functions are preferably linked to a suitable computer control module.

Figs 13(a) and 13(b) provide more detail of the ball support assembly of the preferred embodiment. Fig 13(a) depicts an exploded view of the assembly in
10 which the motor 40 and associated pulley 36 and mounting plate 50 of the ball support mechanism are identified. The pneumatic piston assembly includes a ball support 28, pivot ring 58, piston 54, cylinder 56, actuator housing 52 and pulley 38. In use, piston 54 acts to advance ball support 28 against a loaded ball.

15

It will be apparent to the skilled addressee that the ball supports of the present invention can be constructed with other than smooth concave surfaces to contact the baseball. For example, the ball supports can have adjacent scalloped or arcuate grooves meeting at peaks on the rim of their concave face.

20 These grooves are preferably approximately as deep as the height of the stitching which protrudes from the surface of a baseball. As stated earlier the supports can be constructed from a combination of materials and in this regard, a non-stick surface may be employed on the cup-like faces of the supports to reduce the torque required from the motor, or motors, to position the ball.

25

It will be appreciated by one of skill in the art that the various functions of the baseball spinning assembly of the present invention can be placed under the control of a programmable control module. Further, the control module may be used in conjunction with a portable computer and/or remote control unit.


5 Parameters that may be varied using such a device include, for example, the rate, direction and angle of rotation, and velocity of a propelled ball. These devices and others would be readily apparent to the skilled person and are included within the scope of the present application.

10 Ideally, the ball receiver is provided with a signal so that it is known when a ball is about to be propelled. For example, a ball visible to the ball receiver may be rolled down a track into a feed tube moments before an actual ball is propelled. According to this embodiment, as a ball falls into the feed tube a sensor fires the ball that is waiting in the spin imparting means. Alternatively, a clear plastic
15 tube may be employed. When the ball reaches the top of the clear tube, it falls into the feed tube and activates a sensor which fires the ball waiting in the spin imparting means. Alternative arrangements for signalling to the ball receiver that the ball is about to be propelled are known in the art and are included within the scope of the present invention.

20

It will also be appreciated by one of skill in the art, that the ball spinning assembly 12 of the present invention can be used in combination with a variety of ball loading and firing mechanisms. References to the specific loading and firing mechanisms discussed above are for illustrative purposes only.

25



It is to be understood that although the invention has been described with particular reference to specific embodiments thereof, the form of the invention shown and described in detail is to be taken as the preferred embodiment of same, and that various changes and modifications may be resorted to without
5 departing from the spirit and scope of the invention as defined in the appended claims.

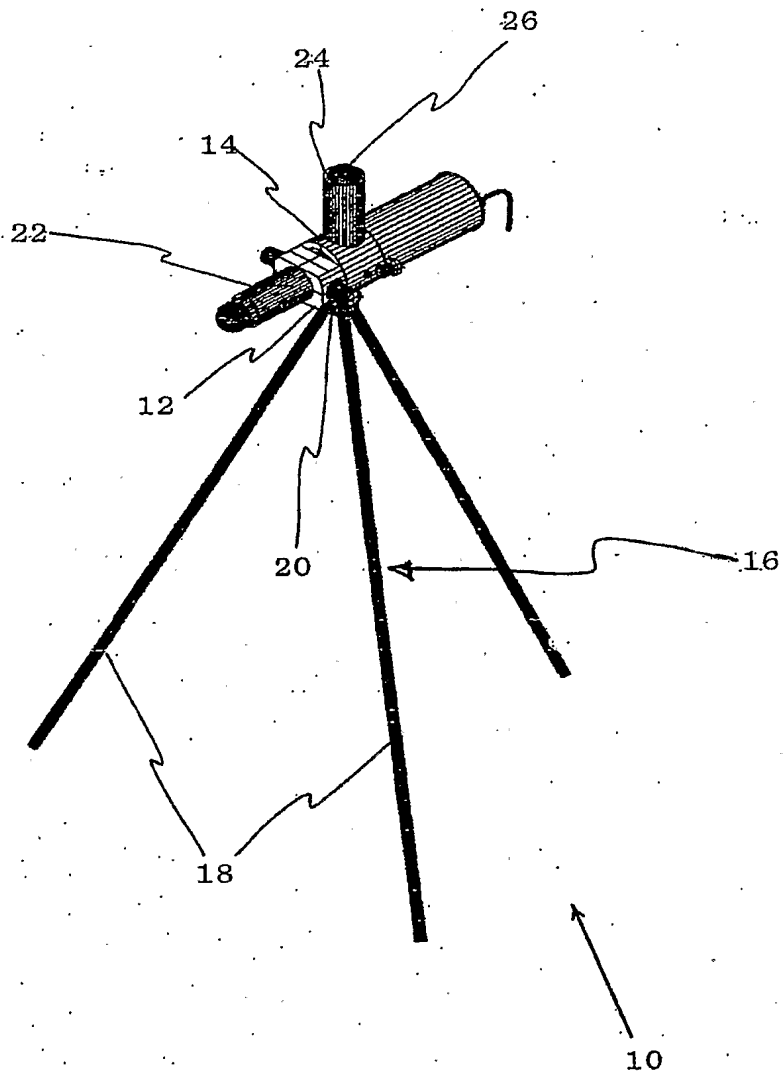


FIG 1

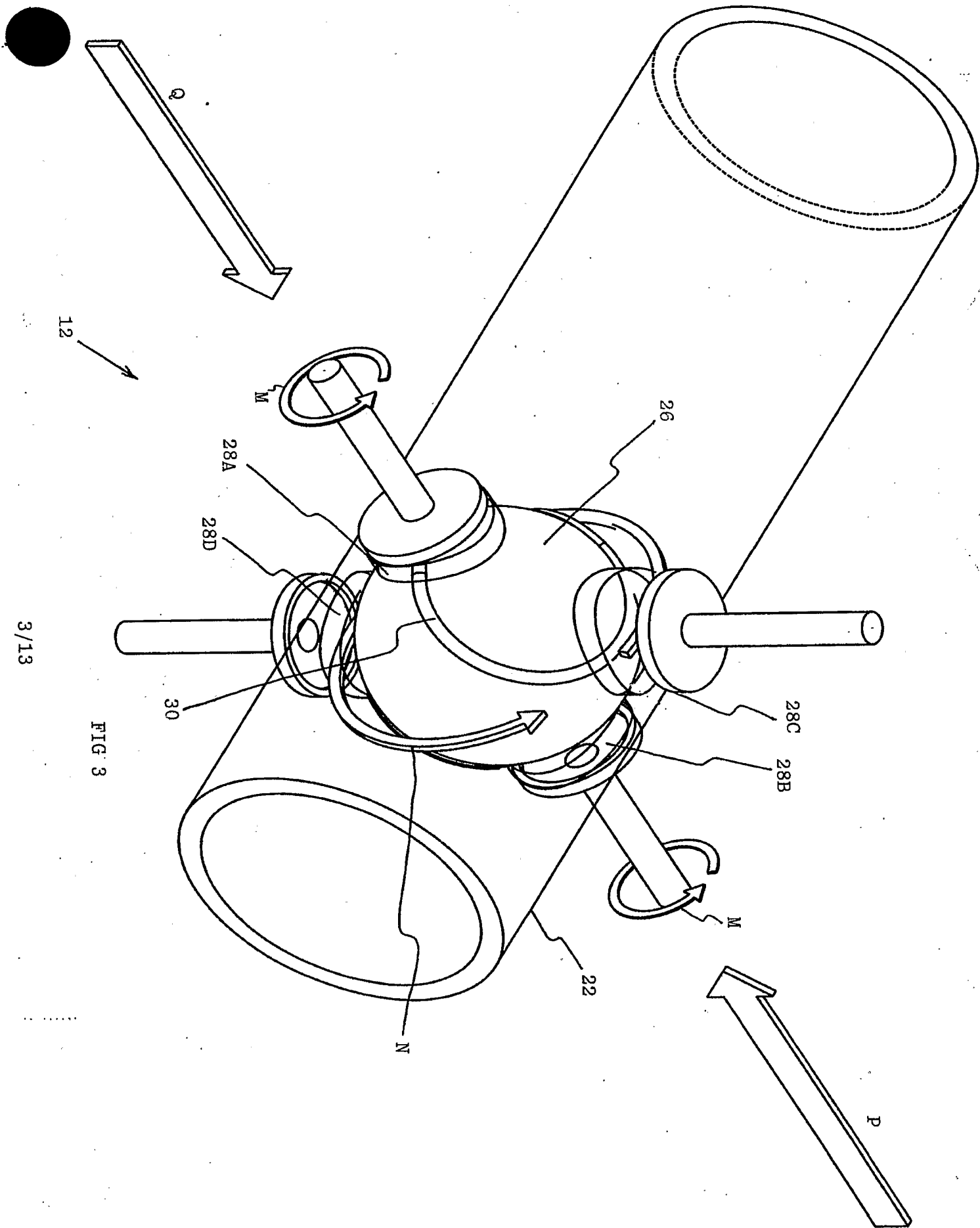
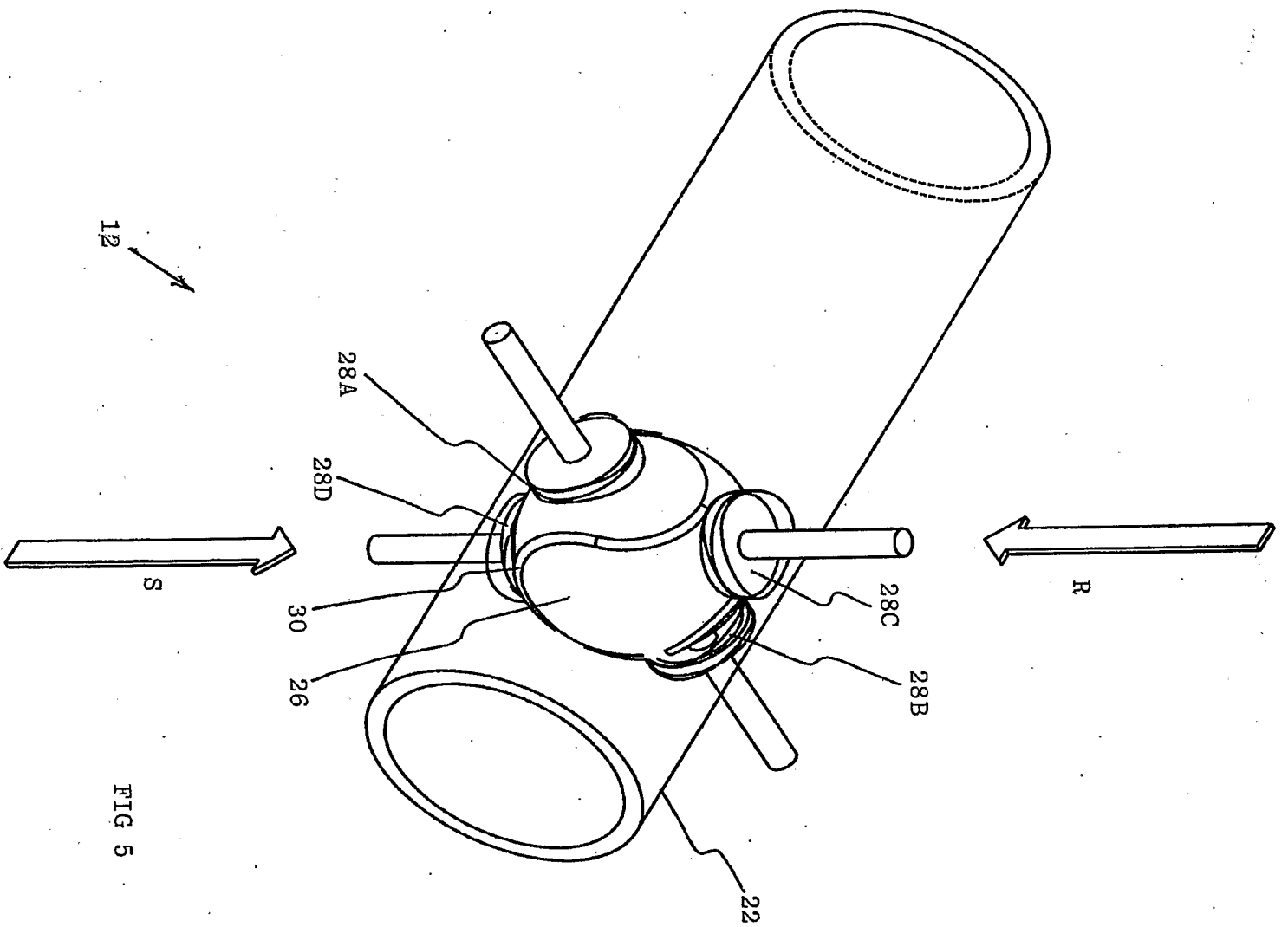


FIG. 3



12

28A

28D

30

26

22

28B

28C

R

S

FIG 5

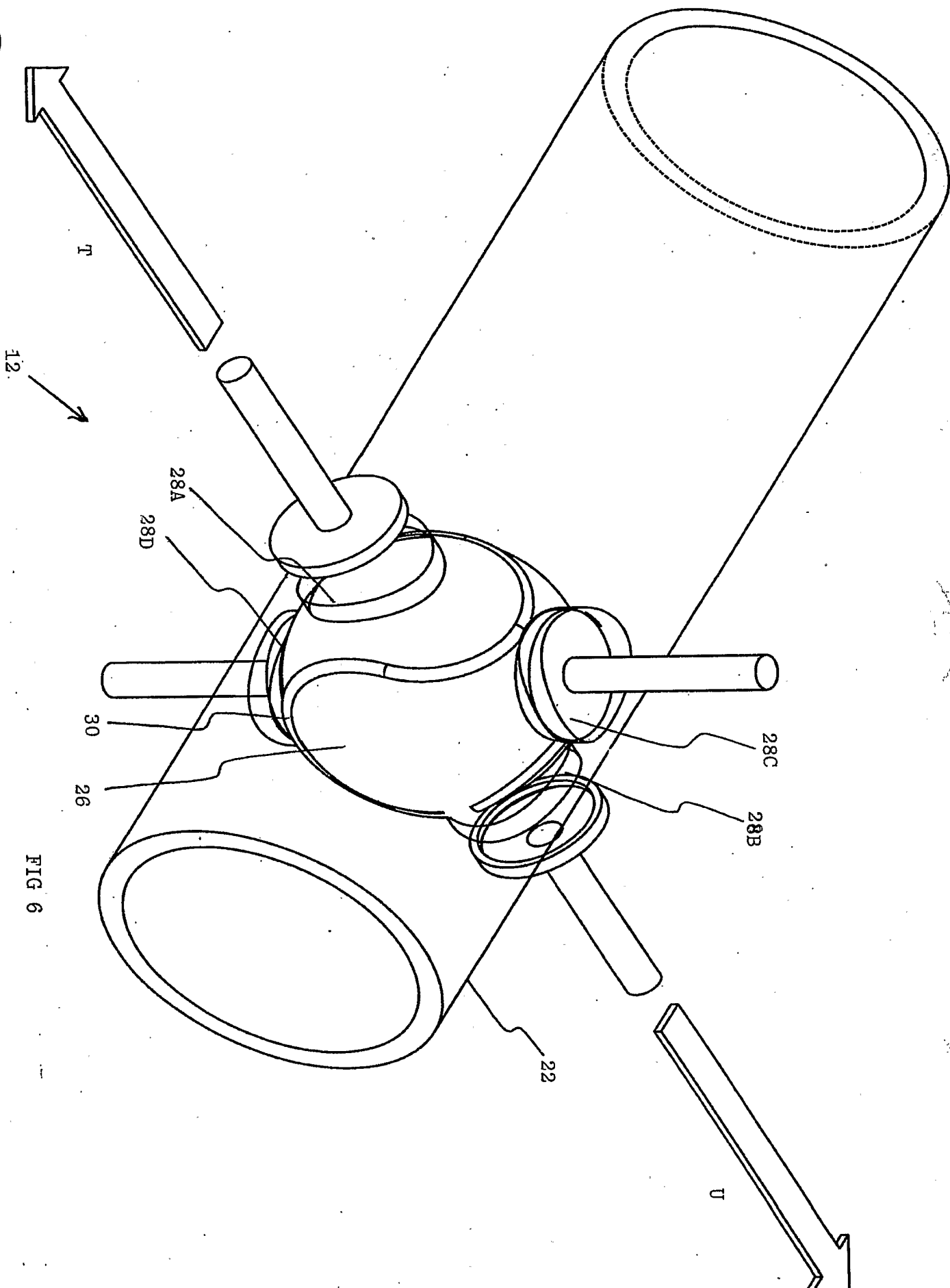


FIG 6

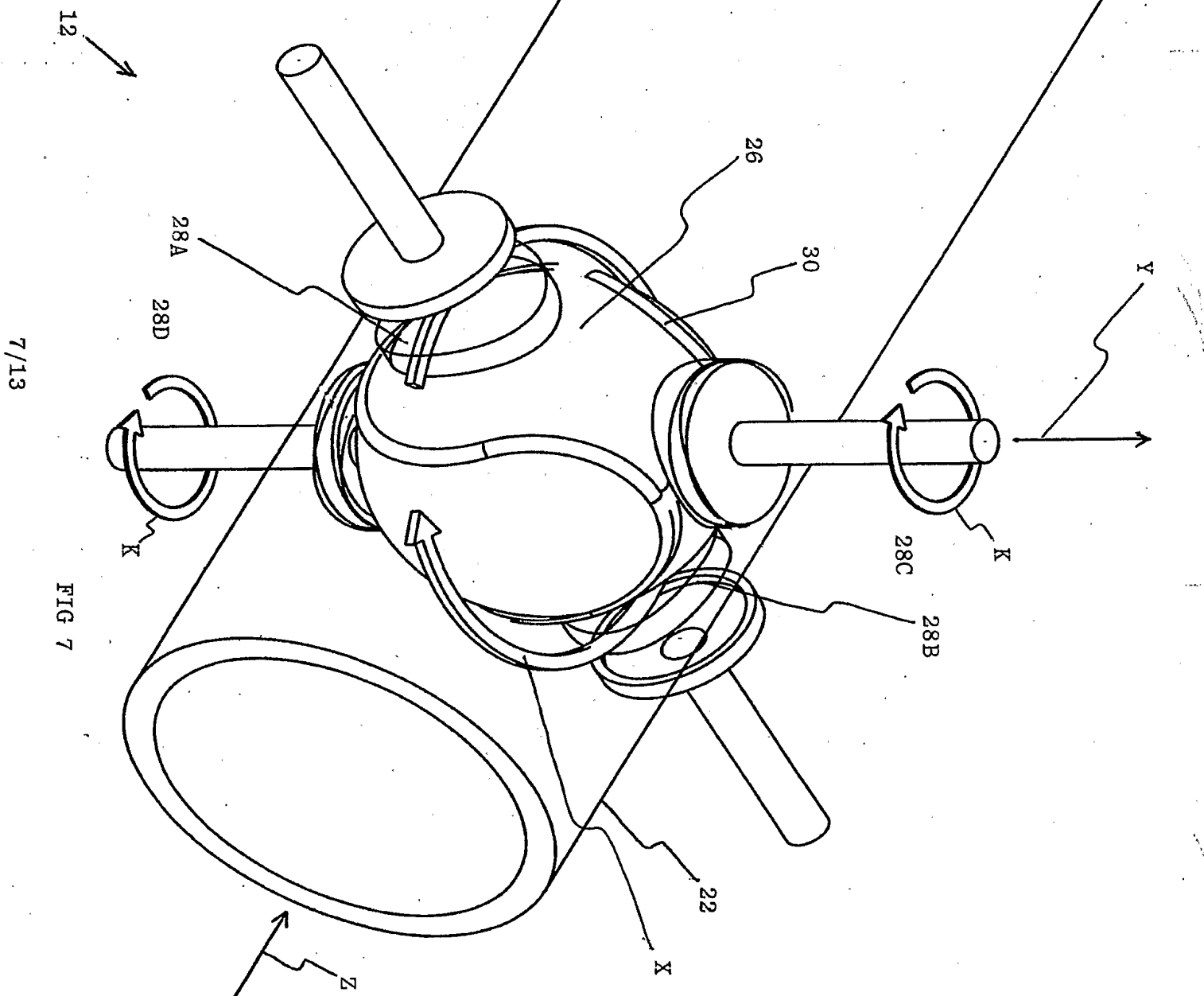


FIG 7

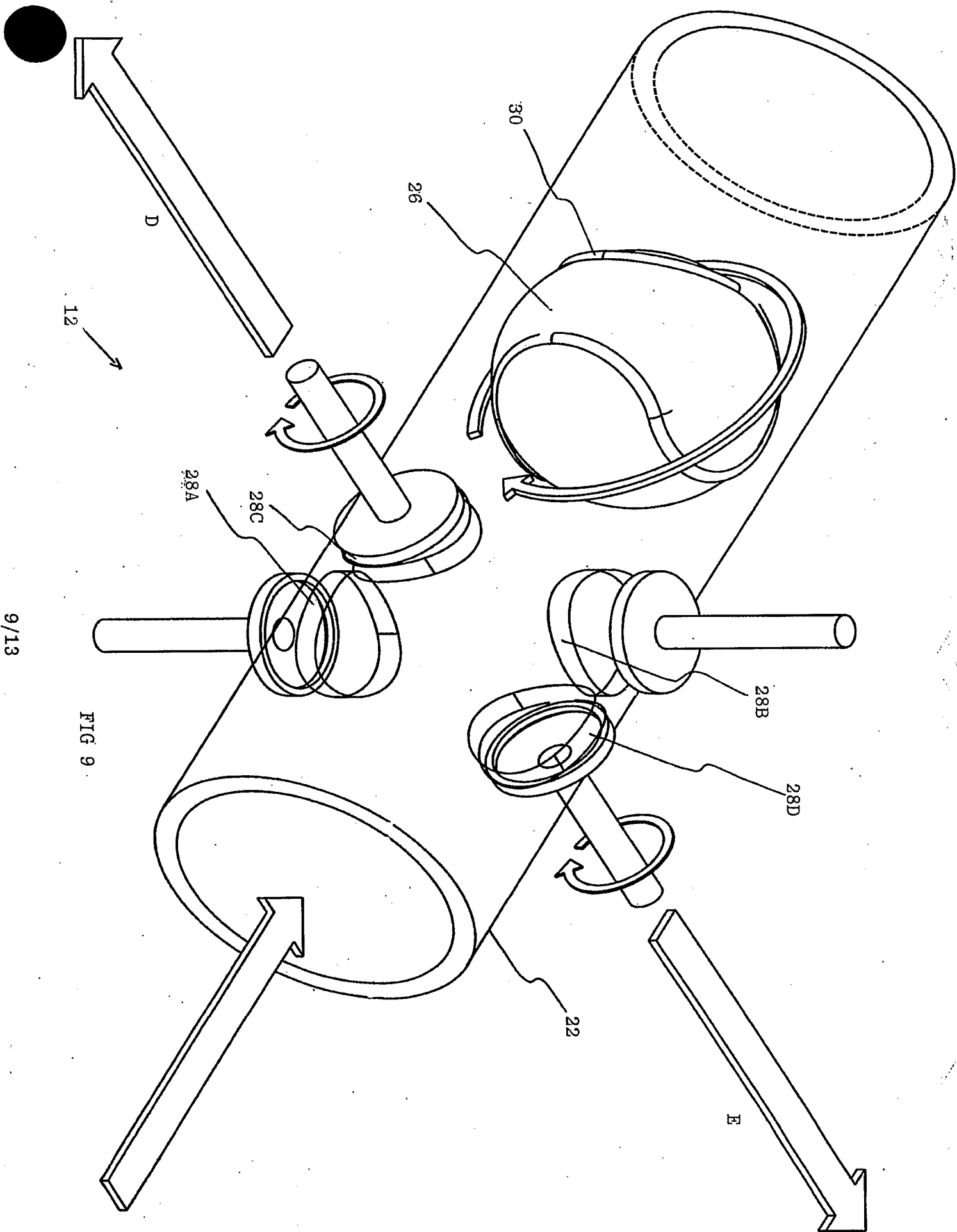


FIG 9

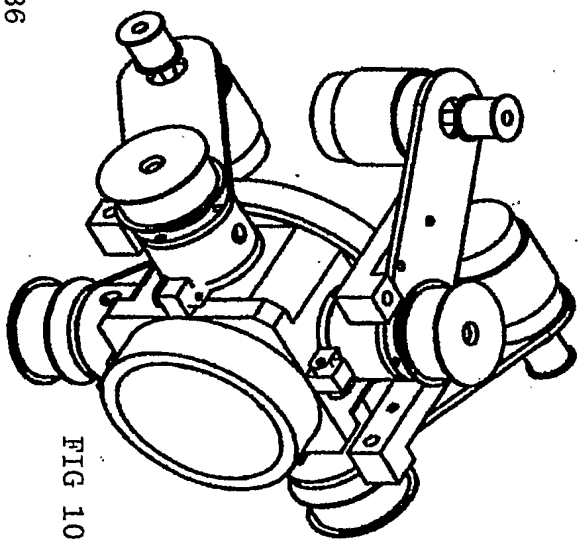


FIG 10(b)

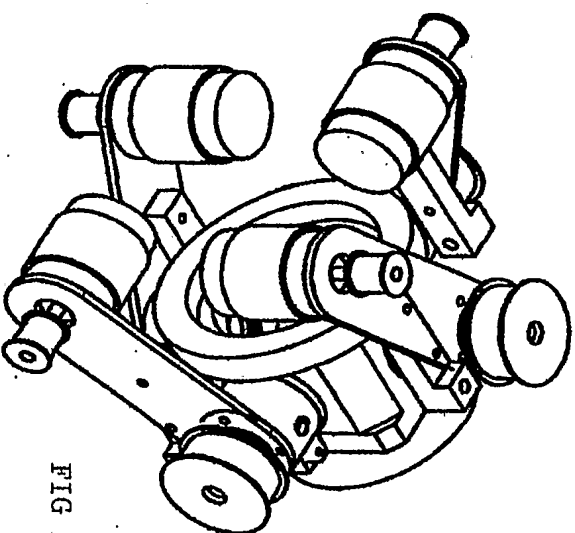


FIG 10(c)

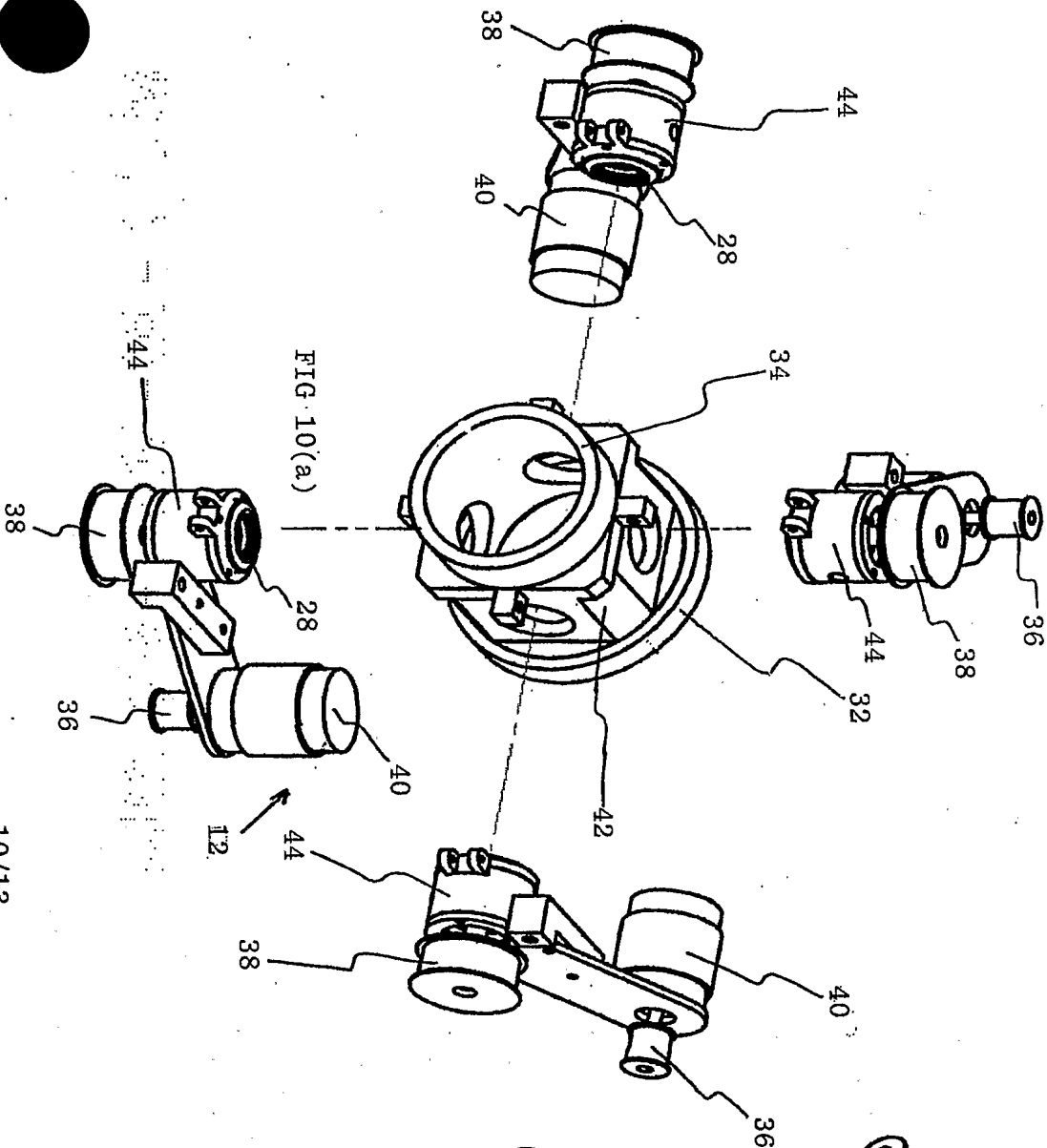


FIG 10(a)

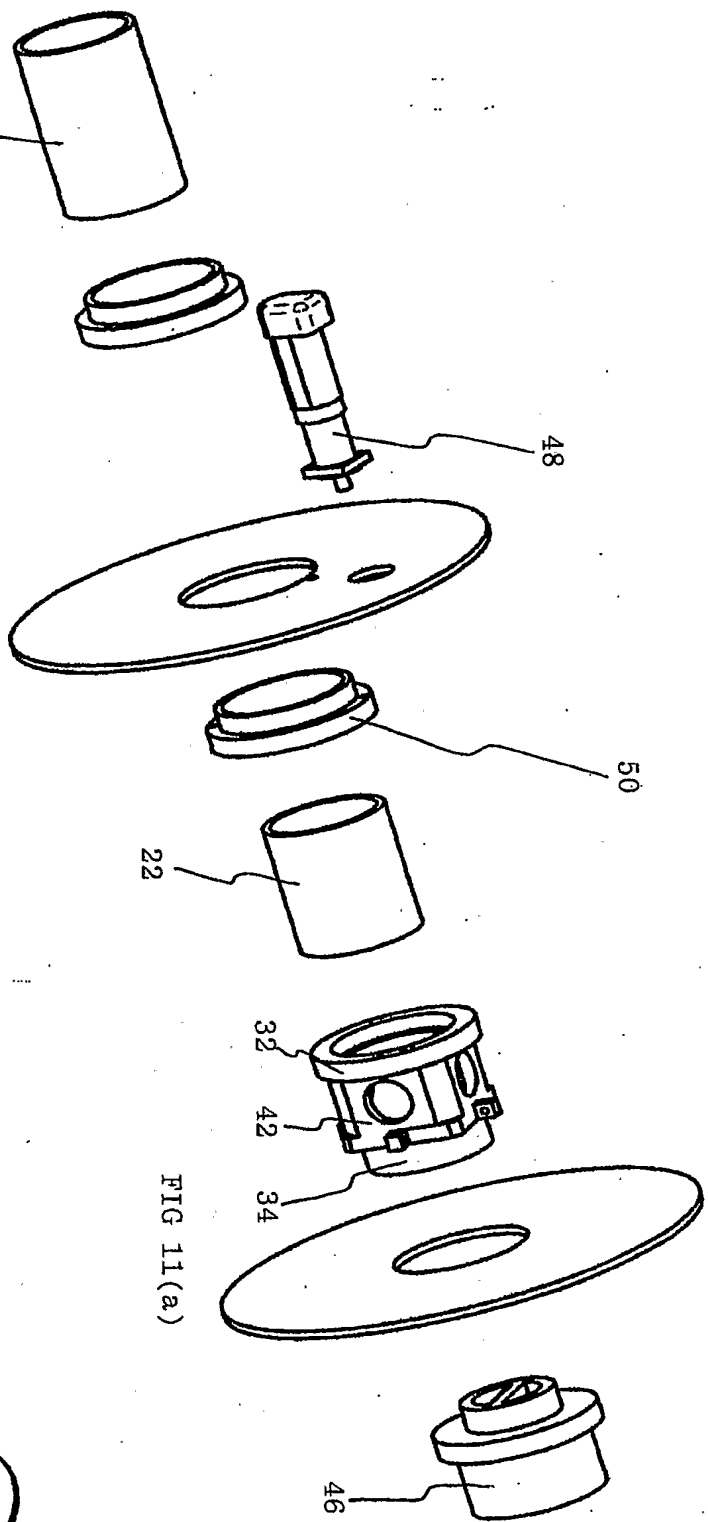


FIG 11(a)

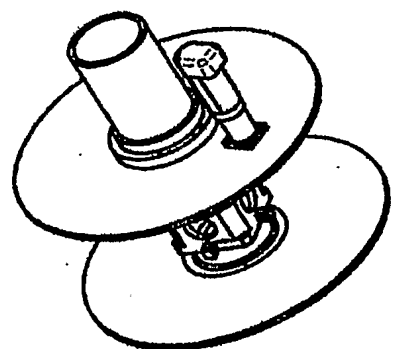


FIG 11(b)

FIG 12(a)

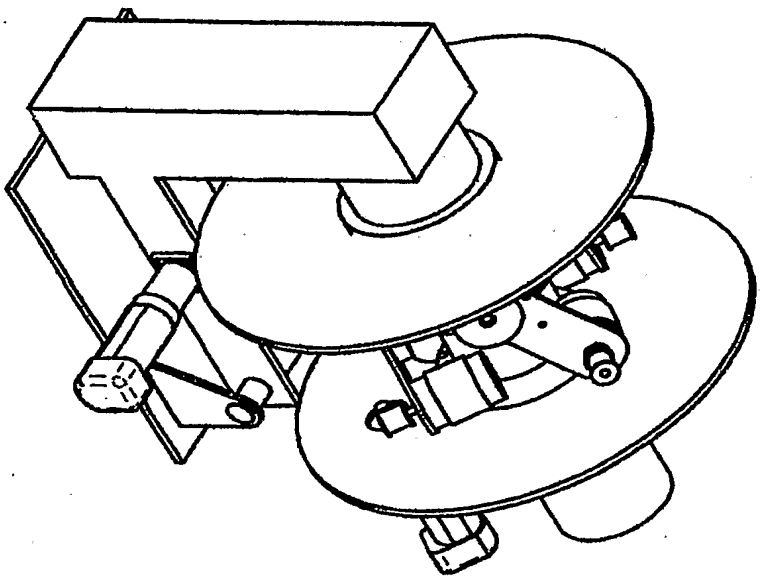


FIG 12(b)

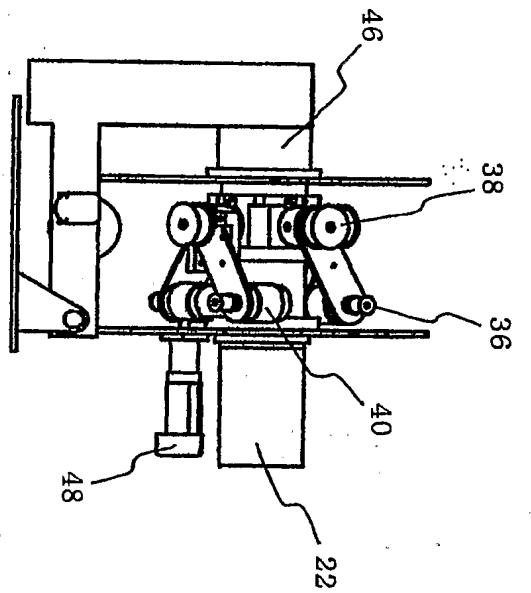


FIG 12(c)

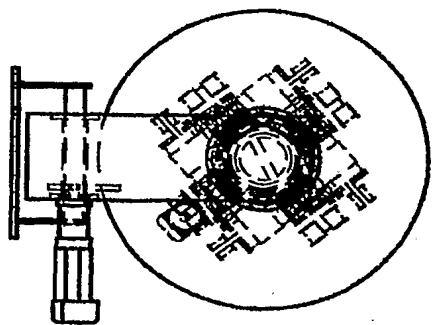


FIG 12(d)

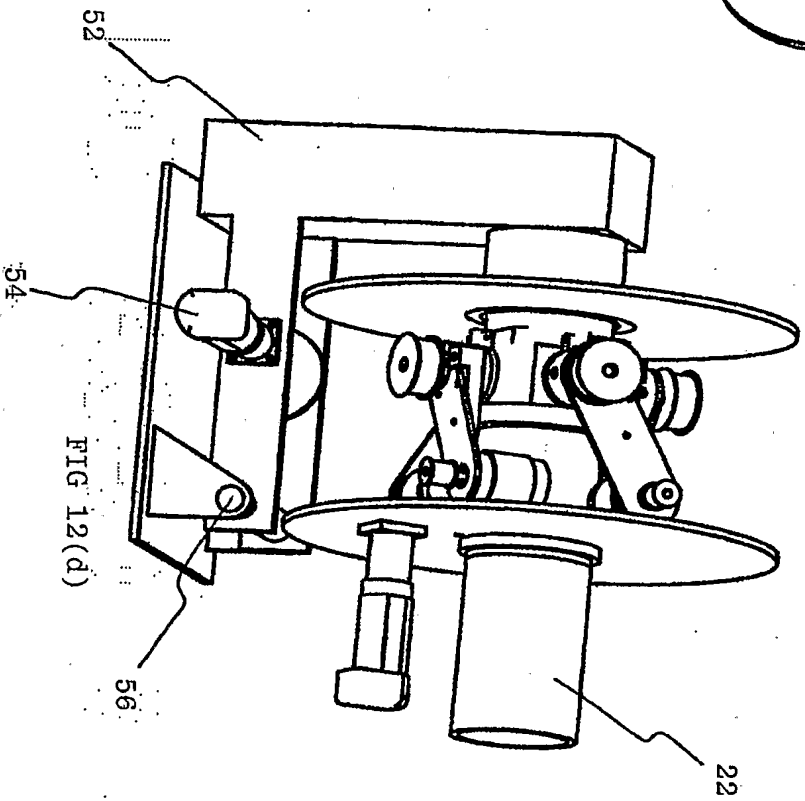
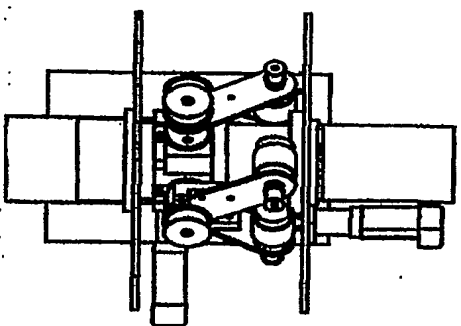


FIG 12(e)



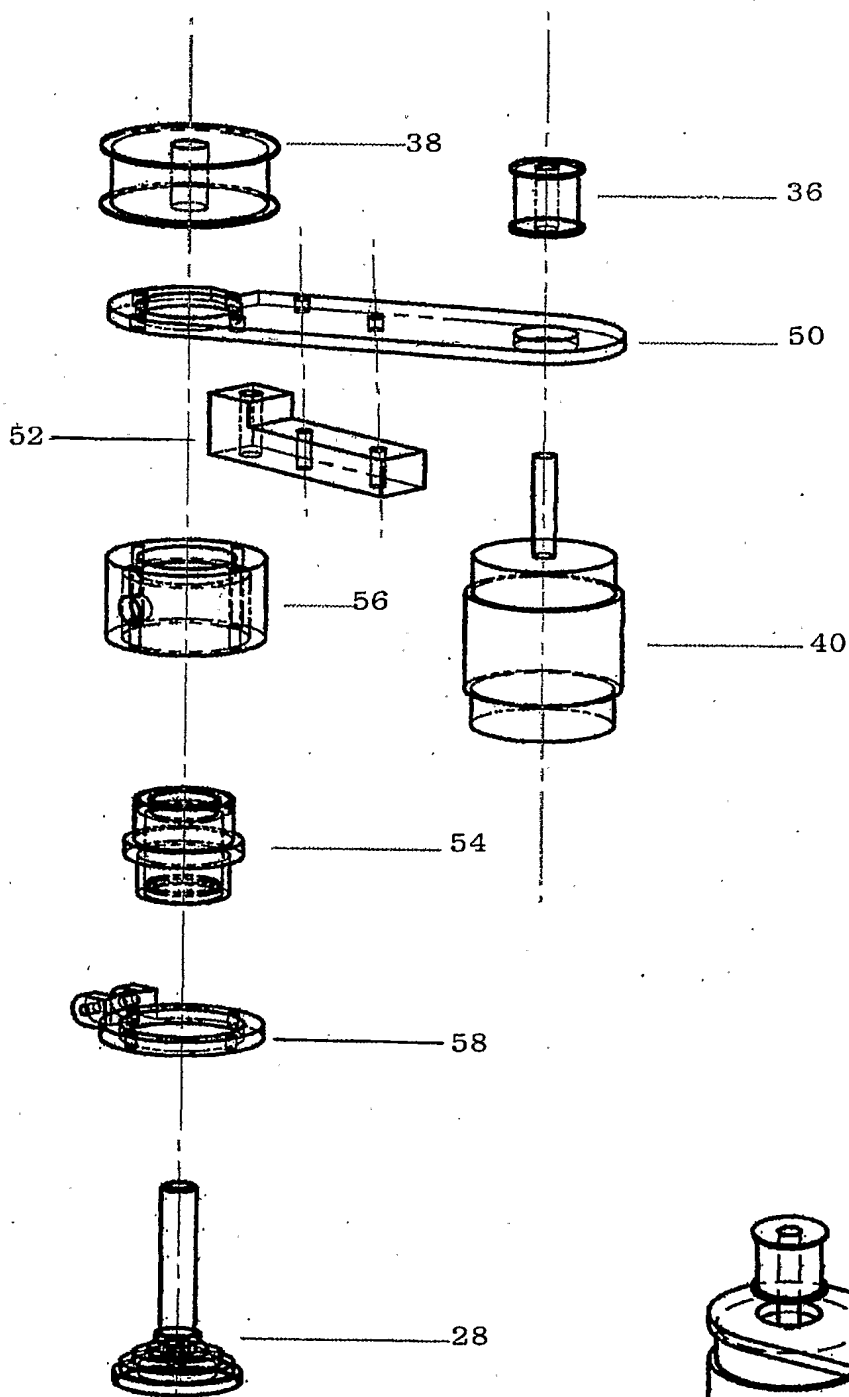


FIG 13(a)

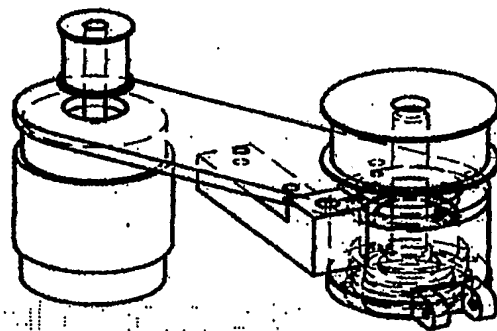


FIG 13(b)